Jesus and Wisdom

Proverbs 8:22-31 is famous for its description of the wisdom of God as a person or entity—a deity-level figure who assists God in some way with the creation of the world. The passage is a crucial starting point for the New Testament's use of Wisdom imagery and terminology for Jesus.

22 "The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of old.
23 Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
24 When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
25 Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth,
26 before he had made the earth with its fields,
or the first of the dust of the world.
27 When he established the heavens, I was there;
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
28 when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
29 when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
30 then I was beside him, like a master workman,
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
31 rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the children of man.

While there is not a complete consensus on the issue, man scholars acknowledge that Proverbs 8 describes a co-creator figure or divine agent in God's creative work. New Testament authors make this equation, and the fact that they do highlights one of the major points of conflict in the great debate over the deity of Christ at the Council of Nicea.

Jesus as Wisdom

There are several instances in the New Testament where Jesus is identified in some way with Wisdom. 1 Cor 1:24 is considered by some an explicit statement to that effect since Paul refers

to Jesus as “Wisdom of God” (I Cor. 1:24). However, it is not completely clear that Paul meant to identify Jesus with the Wisdom of Proverbs 8 in that statement in light of his wording in verse 30: “And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” The wording here seems to simply list wisdom among a number of other attributes and theological concepts. Since it is also possible that Paul could have derived his notion of Jesus as co-creator (Col 1:16; 1 Cor 8:6) from other lines of thought, scholars are hesitant to affirm a “Wisdom Christology” too firmly with respect to Paul.

Much more striking is Luke 11:49-51. This text refers to the Wisdom of God in personified terms as in Proverbs 8. Note the underlined portion:

> 46 And he [Jesus] said, “Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with
> burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one
> of your fingers. 47 Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets
> whom your fathers killed. 48 So you are witnesses and you consent to the
> deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. 49
> Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and
> apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ 50 so that the blood of
> all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged
> against this generation, 51 from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah,
> who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be
> required of this generation.

The passage is straightforward. In context Jesus is the speaker and railing against the hypocrisy of his enemies. But in verse 49 Jesus suddenly interjects another speaker, the Wisdom of God, who proceeds to say in the first person, “I sent you prophets and apostles….” Scholars know this is not a direct quotation of any passage in the Old Testament about Wisdom. Rather, it is apparently an allusion to a passage in another Jewish book considered sacred by certain Jews and early Christians called the Wisdom of Solomon. This book has much to say about divine Wisdom. In Wisdom 7:27, Wisdom “… makes everything new, although she herself never changes. From generation to generation she enters the souls of holy people, and makes them God’s friends and prophets.” Regardless of the source, Jesus creates the impression that it was *Wisdom* who sent the prophets and apostles, something we know from both the Old and New Testament that *God the Father* did (e.g., Isa. 6:8; 10:6; Jer 1:7; I Cor. 1:28). Jesus’s statement therefore identifies Wisdom and God the Father.

Is Jesus confused? Is the gospel writer careless? No. The wording is deliberate—but the amazing impact of the statement comes when one compares Luke 11:49 with the parallel

passage of the incident in Matthew 23. Note the underlining carefully once more, remembering that the speaker, as in Luke 11, is Jesus:

> 29 [And Jesus said,] “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, 30 saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ 31 Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. 33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? 34 Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, 35 so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

The point is startling. Whereas the gospel of Luke had Jesus making Wisdom a second speaker, Matthew puts the very words of Wisdom, who was identified with God the Father in Luke, *into Jesus’ own mouth*! Luke and Matthew, through a written tag-team effort, identified Jesus as God’s co-creator, Wisdom, who was in turn also identified as Yahweh, the God of Israel.

The writer of Hebrews also identifies Jesus with Wisdom. In Hebrews 1:1-3 we read:

> 1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance (Greek: *apaugasma*) of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

The Greek word *apaugasma* occurs only here in the New Testament. It also occurs in only one place in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Bible of the early Church. It is therefore exceedingly rare. The passage in the Septuagint where the word *apaugasma* occurs is from the same extra-canonical book noted above: *The Wisdom of Solomon*:

Wisdom of Solomon 7:24-26 (NRSV)

24 For wisdom is more mobile than any motion;

because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.
25 For she is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.
26 For she is a reflection (*apaugasma*) of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.

Hebrews 1:3 draws on *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:22, where *apaugasma*—the radiance of God's glory—is none other than Wisdom. For the writer of Hebrews, Wisdom was Jesus.

There was actually a very developed theology of divine Wisdom in Jewish theology of Jesus' day and the first few centuries before the New Testament era. The Jewish writer of *Wisdom of Solomon* was elaborating on the idea of personified Wisdom from the book of Proverbs. In Jewish theology, Wisdom was an enthroned divine being in Yahweh's divine council (see the links below on that concept). Here are two examples of how Jewish writers living a century or two before Jesus expressed their thinking about Wisdom:

Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-4, 9-11

[1] O God of my fathers, and Lord of mercy, who has made all things with your word, [2] And ordained man through your Wisdom, that he should have dominion over the creatures which you have made, [3] And order the world according to equity and righteousness, and execute judgment with an upright heart: [4] Give me Wisdom, who sits alongside your throne; and do not reject me from among your children:

[9] And Wisdom was with you, who knows your works, and was present when you made the world, and knew what was acceptable in your sight, and right in your commandments. [10] O send her out of your holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory, that being present she may work with me, that I may know what is pleasing unto you. [11] For she knows and understands all things, and she shall lead me soberly in my doings, and preserve me in her power.

Sirach 24:1-5

[1] Wisdom shall praise herself, and shall glory in the midst of her people. [2] In the council of the most High shall she open her mouth, and triumph before his power. [3] I came out of the mouth of the most High, and covered the earth as a cloud. [4] I dwelt in high places, and my throne is in a cloudy pillar. [5] I alone compassed the circuit of heaven, and walked in the bottom of the deep.

The language is startling. The Jewish writer, committed to a theology that Yahweh was the unique true God, places Wisdom alongside the throne of God or as coming from God's own throne.

For some Jews, this sort of Wisdom language was perfectly in concert with other Godhead language of the Old Testament (see the link below). Others took the language in another way—one that has dramatic ramifications for framing Paul's struggle with Jewish loyalty to the Law.

Jewish writers knew Wisdom was grammatically feminine in Hebrew ("she"; "her"). This was the reason for the use of feminine pronouns in descriptions of Wisdom. Some Jewish theologians made much of the fact that the word for "law" (torah) was also grammatically feminine. This led some to identify the Law itself as Wisdom. This meant that, to many Jews, the Torah (Wisdom) was divine. Consequently, whereas New Testament writers filtered their thinking about Wisdom through Proverbs 8 and its deity co-creator alongside God, other Jews saw Wisdom as God's Word, the Torah, as his agent of creation. The New Testament (and the Old Testament as well) actually merge these ideas by identifying God in human form as the Word (John 1:1-3, 14). But many Jews refused to see Jesus as the focal point of all these references, throwing their fierce loyalty to the Law. This puts Paul's struggle to articulate the gospel "apart from the law (Torah)" in an entirely new light (Rom 3:21). Defining Wisdom as Jesus was a crucial strategy for the apostles to articulate the truth that Jesus was Wisdom (and the Word), the means of salvation, not the Mosaic Law (cp. Matt 5:17–20).

All of this is crucial for understanding the debate over the deity of Christ at Nicea in 325 A.D.

Jesus, Wisdom, and Nicea

Proverbs 8 and the identification of Jesus with Wisdom was a controversial issue for the early church. The dominant view of earliest Christianity brought to the council was that the Son (Jesus) was God in the flesh. He was the Word and Wisdom incarnated in the man known as Jesus of Nazareth. Consequently, there was never a time when the Son had not existed. Their opponents (Christian known as Arians) believed that there was indeed a time when the Son had not existed—he had been created. One of their arguments came from Prov 8:22:

> The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. (ESV)

The Hebrew verb translated "possessed" is *qanah* and is the root of the controversy. The verb has a wide range of meanings in biblical usage, including "to create" (Gen 14:19, 22; Deut 32:6). Arians argued that Prov 8:22 should be translated to reflect the idea that Wisdom had been

created—in fact, Wisdom was God's first and highest creation. Since Wisdom and the Son were identified with each other in the New Testament, the Son had to have been created. Eternal or not, the Son (Jesus) was still the agent for the rest of God's creation (Col 1:16; 1 Cor 8:16) and the savior of the world. The issue, then, was Jesus' full deity in terms of eternality.

Those who held that the New Testament presented Jesus as truly God incarnate, requiring him to be eternal, argued that the verb in Prov 8:22 was best translated "bring forth," its sense in Gen 4:1, where Eve brought forth Cain her son. The semantic nuance deserves close attention. The idea conveyed in Gen 4:1 is not conception (i.e., bringing into existence)—that idea also expressed in the same verse with another verb (*harah*). Eve does not "create" Cain. Cain emerges from her womb after being conceived earlier. That is, ancient Israelites would not view *birth* as creation since they knew something was already living inside the womb, despite having no scientific knowledge of how that worked. Old Testament women knew they were "with child" when the fetus became active (they would of course suspect pregnancy at the cessation of the menstrual cycle and other physical symptoms, as women of today would discern). From this perspective, *qanah* is understood as speaking to *the moment of emergence*, not the beginning of the life. Wisdom was therefore brought forth from the Godhead to assist God the Father with creation. This understanding of the verb in Prov 8:22 retained the assertion that Jesus (who is Wisdom and the Son) is eternal.

The eternality of Wisdom can also be argued on logical grounds. Since Wisdom is also cast as an attribute of God (part of what makes God who He is), Wisdom must be eternal, else one would have the problem of saying there was a time when God had no wisdom. How then could God be God? It would be unthinkable to the biblical writer for the God of Israel to *lack* wisdom at some point. Wisdom is eternal since God (with His attributes) is eternal. Therefore, the same must be said of the Son, who came to earth incarnated as the man Jesus of Nazareth.